

Making Distinctions A Preliminary White Paper

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This paper began as two email messages. One was to members of a *Professional Coaching Course* pod I mentored from 2002 to 2003. I wrote it in response to the question: "How is a distinction different from an assessment?" The second email was to classmates in the *Coaching to Excellence* Leaders Training class who were exploring the question, "How can we clear up the confusion people have about the notion of making distinctions?"

In the year since I wrote those emails, several other people requested copies. After each request, I added something new. Today I decided to call this assemblage of thoughts a "white paper," one that I suspect will continue to evolve...

Outline

- I. A Few Distinctions about Distinctions
- II Assessments versus Distinctions
- III. Teaching Someone How to Make Distinctions

I. A Few Distinctions about Distinctions

The term "distinctions" is one that confuses a lot of people at first. This term comes from "distinguish," the (Greek or Latin) root of which means "to bring from the foreground to the background." My interpretation for coaching: we are bringing things from the background of our client's attention to the foreground.

How do we make distinctions? There are so many ways. Here is what I've come up with so far.

A. Verbal

1. **Via question or statement.** There are many ways to phrase these.

- a. An explicit suggestion that A is different from B.

"Hey, Rudolph, ever think about the difference between a red nose being a sign of inferiority [A] and a red nose being a unique gift you can offer a group [B]?"

Or as a statement: "There is a difference between a red nose being..."

- b. Point out B without mentioning A. You bring B from the background to the foreground of consciousness without specifically mentioning A.

"Hey, Rudolph, ever consider that your red nose might be a unique gift you can offer the group?"

Or as a statement: "My take is that your red nose could actually be a unique gift."

- c. Point out that A is but one of a larger category, implying a realm of new possibilities.

"One way of viewing a red nose is that it's a sign of inferiority. There are many other ways of viewing a red nose, some of them quite positive."

Or, to give another example: "Yelling really loud is certainly one way to get a point across. I have to imagine that there are other ways..."

- d. Suggest that A is an untested assumption¹.

"I sense you have an untested assumption that goes like this: 'If I say anything other than 'yes', others will dislike me and stop including me.'"

- e. Hold a notion up and then challenge it directly.

"Many of us think that our perspective is the only one that has validity. I don't think so!"

- f. Hold up a notion and then ask a question that cuts the ground out from under it.

"For you, the only possible reason that someone could like you is that you dress well. Well, let me ask you this: how come you made so many new friends at that party where you dressed like that character from Sesame Street and hung out in a trash can all night?"

- g. Go straight for the chop down.

"I want to disavow you of the notion that all integral coaches are brilliant, funny and loud. All of us are brilliant and funny, but some of us speak softly."

2. Via metaphor.

- a. Don't talk initially about A and B. Instead, jump right into the metaphor without framing, then tie it back to A and B.

"Imagine what it would be like if we were farming and we looked at the crops and shouted 'Grow! Grow!' It wouldn't work really well, would it, because crops grow gradually, and this cannot be forced. The best we can do is offer the conditions for growth like sunlight, water and good top soil and remove impediments to growth like insects that cause disease. Humans are the same way. If we want to develop people, we

¹ This form of expressing a distinction comes from Kegan and Lahey's book *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work*.

can't force them to grow. We have to create the conditions, like clear roles, resources they will need, comfortable chairs, a decent salary, fulfilling promises, and a friendly ear."

b. Frame the metaphor first

"Developing people is just like farming. It's not about forcing it. It's about creating the proper conditions for growth. Imagine what it would be like if we were farming and we looked at the crops..."

3. Via story

Our own personal tales, stories of other clients, stories from movie, literature, etc.

a. Jump right into the story.

"Remember that scene from Star Wars where Chewbacca is at the conveyor belt watching all these broken robot parts come out. Suddenly, he sees C3PO's head and torso, and he lets out a great wail of lamentation. As an audience member, you can just feel the love. You can feel the sense that C3PO's fate matters to Chewbacca. Remember that? Well, my friend, that's exactly the kind of relationship that we're talking about. One based on allowing others' suffering to impress us, to touch our hearts, rather than viewing it as someone else's problem or blaming them or congratulating ourselves for not having been as stupid as they were."

b. Frame the story in advance by how it's related to the client.

"Another way to think about other's suffering is to let it impress us. Consider that scene from Star Wars..."

B. Somatic and Kinesthetic

1. Literally move someone's body to show that person the distinction.

Adjust someone's posture (move shoulders back, tilt head appropriately, etc.)

2. Show the distinction in one's own (coach's) body.

"Watch me and notice the difference between when I lean forward like this, and when I stand upright."

3. Draw upon other senses:

- Hearing (Play a song that illustrates something)
- Taste ("Try this drink with and without sugar. Notice the difference?")
- Smell (sniffing wines)
- Touch (how different fabrics feel on a person's hand or body)
- Sight (inviting someone to look at facial expressions of ten different people to demonstrate how face reveals emotion)

4. Physically show someone the difference

- Shoot a basketball with one hands versus two
- Hold a tennis racket with the face point slightly down versus way down or way up

C. Emotional

Note: Working with emotions requires a special competence that most of us are just beginning to develop. Working in this domain is incredibly important AND risky until we ourselves have competence with emotions.

1. Notice an emotion that naturally shows up right there during the conversation and then point it out to them saying

"I see tears in your eyes and sense you are feeling sadness. Notice how that feels."²

2. Intentionally evoke emotions in someone.

- Play music that evokes strong emotions (e.g. opera)
- Show a movie or photographs that evoke certain emotions
- Invite them to speak words that evoke certain emotions
- Through certain forms of touch
- Through contact with certain types of people (e.g. holding a baby)

II. Assessments versus Distinctions

Another area of confusion: the difference between assessments and distinctions. I learn more about this each day. Here are my latest ideas.

A. What is an "assessment?"

As we know from the Five Speech Acts model³, an assessment is not the truth. It is not even an assertion of what is true or untrue. It is instead a person's subjective "take." That is the first important thing to know about an assessment. The second is that an assessment can either be grounded (in evidence) or ungrounded.

B. When do coaches make assessments?

Only about every two minutes. Because we live in a world of interpretation, we are constantly making assessments. Here is a small sample of assessments we make in coaching:

- Assessing the value of talking with a potential client
- Assessing how much time to spend with a potential client in an initial conversation
- Assessing whether a client is open to coaching

² One resource: Paul Ekman, professor at UCSF, who has several books and a CD-ROM about interpreting emotions from facial expressions.

³³ The Five Speech Acts is a set of distinctions from Fernando Flores (and, before him, from John Austin and John Searles). In the Ten Ways metamodel, the Speech Acts model first shows up as useful for clients at the Conversations Level.

- Assessing whether we would be a good coach for this particular client
- Assessing whether and when to move from a Conversation for Relationship to a Conversation for Possibility or Action
- Assessing how to make an offer to coach someone
- Assessing when to promise to the client that they will receive a proposal
- Assessing what to put in the proposal (outcomes, timeframe, fees, etc.)
- Assessing whether or not to charge someone for an intake
- Assessing what questions to ask in an intake
- Assess whom to interview in a 360 degree interview process

Note that all of these assessments occur before we have even begun the process of

- Assessing where this client is in life (current reality)
- Assessing where they are headed (desired future)⁴
- Assessing what is getting in the way

C. What is the particular type of assessment that occurs in between the intake session and the first “coaching conversation?”

I think it is an expanded version of the last bullet point listed above. To be specific, we assess:

- What the client thinks they want (desired outcomes of a coaching relationship)
- The client’s major commitments in life⁵ and the extent to which they are realizing them
- The client’s immediate concerns
- The client’s mood (if we can discern it)
- What’s going on with the 4 quadrants: in which quadrant(s) does the client think “the solution” lies, and which quadrant(s) represent their blind spot, “the unexplored territory from which no traveler returns.”
- The client’s primary hindering distinction. This is the aspect of their structure of interpretation that is most getting in the way of their competence and fulfillment in life.
- A powerful new distinction that, if accepted and embodied by the client, could have a positive impact
- The specific competence the client needs to develop to embody this distinction
- The client’s current level of competence (described in behavioral terms) and the level of future competence (also described in behavioral terms) that we think provides a good stretch for them. These are also known as their Current Reality and Desired Future
- Practices that develop this competence
- Self-observation exercises that test the new distinction and reveal how it shows up in everyday life

D. What parts of this assessment (in #3) do we actually share with clients?

Ironically, answering this question itself requires making an assessment: what will be most useful to say to the client? How much is enough, and how much is overwhelming?

⁴ The model of Current Reality and Desired Future comes to us from Robert Fritz (*The Path of Least Resistance*) by way of Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*). What is different about our model is that unlike Fritz and Senge, we include a rigorous methodology to identify “what gets in the way” (the hindering aspects of the client’s current structure of interpretation)) and dissolve it (via a new distinction, practices, and self-observation exercises).

⁵ I make an assessment of every client’s core commitments because it provides the frame for my relationship with them. I also reveal to my clients what I think they are committed to before I suggest why they are stuck and offer a new distinction.

Typically, I share the following four assessments:

1. The client's commitments and immediate concerns
2. Where the client is now with respect to their commitments and immediate concerns and where they'd like to be
3. A way the client sees things that interferes with realizing their commitments and resolving their immediate concerns. This is known as their hindering distinction.
4. A new way of seeing that can help them fulfill their commitments. This is known as a new distinction)⁶

Here is an example of the four-part assessment:

1. "I sense you are really committed to learning to juggle a soccer ball on your head. How I know this: first, you have invested hundreds of dollars in new soccer balls and haircuts in an attempt to do this. And you mentioned that you lose sleep over this three nights a week. Am I correct to assume this is one of your major life commitments?"
2. "Here is where things stand. Right now you can juggle a ball on your head 30 times consecutively. You'd like to be able to do this 60 times consecutively within 3 months. Does this sound right to you?"
3. "I've been reflecting upon the many vivid stories you told about how you practice and what you think it will take to succeed. From this, I have a hunch about what seems to be getting in the way of moving from 30 to 60. For you, the key to moving forward is having high quality soccer balls and a well coiffed head."
4. "Let me offer another way of seeing the situation. While the quality of soccer balls and hair are certainly no small matter, they are not the only determinants of juggling success. Another incredibly important factor is how loose and relaxed a person's body is. Have you ever considered the difference between juggling when your body is stiff and juggling when your body is loose and relaxed?"

Several important points to highlight:

- A distinction is a particular form of assessment. This is why, when we offer a distinction, we often refer to it as "my take."
- Because a distinction is an assessment, it is incredibly important for it to be grounded (as opposed to just being a whim or even an intuition). It is useful to describe this grounding to clients. We can do this by telling them what we have seen and heard that leads us to suggest that this distinction could be useful for them.
- Because a distinction is an assessment (rather than the truth), we "put it to the test." We do this in at least three ways:
 - a. By inquiring (and observing somatically) how well the distinction lands for the client and having a conversation with the client about this
 - b. By asking the client to test out the distinction for themselves by doing self-observation exercises
 - c. By reframing the distinction at various points in the process, as needed, and observing how these land with the client.

⁶ I also offer practices and self-observation practices, but these come later

III. Teaching Someone How to Make Distinctions

In December 2002 I worked for 5 hours with an executive coach (and author of articles about coaching) who was going for certification through the International Coach Federation as a Professionally Certified Coach. She asked me to help her learn how to make distinctions because she had a philosophical and physiological antipathy to pointing things out to people. Making distinctions, she told me, reminded her of the Nazis. She requested that I help her open to the possibility that making distinctions could be a good thing in the world.

I devised a very simple, almost elementary, way of having her learn how to make distinctions.⁷ My first intent was to demystify distinctions by showing her how she already made them every day. My second was to provide a safe place to practice making distinctions, beginning with some silly ones that would lighten the topic. The process went something like this.

Steps

1. I told her that she makes hundreds of distinctions every week but just doesn't realize it. She didn't believe me.
2. I started making ridiculously simple distinctions, like the Rudolph the Reindeer distinction and all sorts of silly examples involving chocolate, peanut butter, and standing on one's head. Then I engaged her in an inquiry about whether these were in fact distinctions. She started to open to the possibility that she already makes lots of distinctions.
3. I gave her examples of what a client might say and then a distinction a coach could make. Again, I used ridiculously simple examples. Client: "I have a headache because I hate my boss." Coach: "Your boss might be one cause for your headache. Other causes might be: lying in the sun for eight hours without a hat or bumping your head into the wall, which you said you did this morning."
4. We did a role-play. Rather than me describing what a client and coach could say, I engaged her in "playing this out" by having her play the client. I fed her lines of what a client might say, she said them, and then I responded by offering new distinctions. For example, she would say out loud to me, "I have a headache because I hate my boss." Then I would offer her a new distinction about the different possible causes of headaches.
5. We did a second role-play. I told her that we were now going to switch places. This time I would play the client and she would play the coach. I would say something and then I would let her make a new distinction. The first time we did this, she didn't know what

⁷ I actually only helped her learn part of what one would say in making a distinction. For example, we did not practice the words a coach would use to provide grounding for this assessment...or the words she would use to illustrate how embodying this distinction could open up new possibilities for the client. Why didn't we cover these topics? Because at the time I coached her, I had what I now consider to be a fairly narrow notion of what one would say in making a distinction. In recent months, I have adapted a linguistic framework called the Four Parts of Speech (not to be confused with the Five Speech Acts) to the process of making distinctions. I had the pleasure of testing out this framework at the graduate session of the September 2003 Coaching Roundtable in San Francisco. This framework is the topic of a future white paper.

to say (what distinction to make), so I changed tacts. We did the same thing again, except this time I fed her the coach's line (the distinction) and asked her to repeat it after I (the client) said my bit. Again, it was key that these were innocuous examples so she felt free to say them...and thereby build the capacity into her language.

6. Third role-play. I played the client again, but this time she made the new distinction without my help. When she was done making the distinction, I commented on whether what she said was a distinction and, if it wasn't, how she could phrase it differently. Then I asked her to repeat this rephrasing. Then I pointed out that there were numerous different ways to make the same distinction and offered examples to illustrate this point.
7. By the end, I was playing the client, saying really silly stuff like "I think the way to discover my life purpose is to stand on my head for two hours and wait for an answer." And she was coming up with distinctions all on her own, like "Standing on your head is one way to find your life purpose. There are many others, like...."

When we concluded our work together, she said that she found this exercise to be very helpful. It transformed her notion of what a distinction was. In other words, the exercise made a powerful distinction about what a distinction is.

Closing Request

I welcome your feedback and ideas. Please send to amiel@curiousleader.com